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ABSTRACT

Investigating the relationship between learning and academic journal writing, a study examined features of journal entries and students' characteristics. Subjects, students enrolled in an introductory linguistics course for English, English education, and elementary education, were asked to keep a journal during the course. To determine students' perceptions of the nature of the journal, students rated what they perceived to be a "good journal" as opposed to a "good essay," using a set of semantic differential scales. During the course, students handed in three representative entries. At this point in the study, only the first entries were rated by three judges for: (1) development of ideas; (2) application to material; (3) course-specific and non-course-specific content; (4) adoption of metacognitive stance; (5) formal/informal qualities; (6) objective/affective expression; (7) depth of elaboration; (8) degree of predetermination; (9) degree of externally static/internally constructed knowledge; and (10) rater's negative/positive reactions. Results indicated that the degree of informality was negatively related to the degree of elaboration or exploration of knowledge, and the raters' positive/negative ratings were most highly related to degree of elaboration and knowledge exploration. Students conceived of journal writing as significantly more informal, private, unstructured and conversational than their conceptions of a "good paper," indicating that students' perceptions of form influenced their writing. (Two figures, four tables of data, a sample journal entry, and a list of description categories and rating scales are appended.) (MM)

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ED304691

"Discourse Conventions in Academic Response Journals"

presented to the Conference of College Composition and Communication, March 16, 1989, in Seattle, Washington

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In this presentation, we will be discussing the relationship between academic journal writing and learning. We define academic journal writing to mean journals assigned in courses in which students respond to readings, class discussions, or lectures.

When we try to define the formal characteristics of a journal we face some difficulties. As relatively informal and unstructured modes of written response they seemingly defy attempts to define their form. However, journals seem to show evidence of having their own conventions. Investigating just what those conventions might be prompted this work.

Research on journal writing and learning. Despite claims that journals promote learning, there has been little previous research on the relationship between features of journals and amount of learning. We will review some of these studies (listed on the last page of the accompanying handout).

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Fulwiler (in Anson, 1989) examined the features of what he deemed to be "better journals" in terms of students' performance in his class. He found that the "better journals" were informal, subjective, inquisitive, contradictory, reflective, exploratory, and contained questions and doubts. Fulwiler argued that students who adopted a more informal, exploratory stance were more likely to formulate the course material "in their own words," enhancing their understanding of that material. However, Fulwiler did not conduct any empirical analysis of the relationship between journal features and learning.

Some research indicated that more subjective, reader-based writing about literature contributes to higher levels of interpretation than more formal writing.

To compare the effects of formal versus more informal writing, Newell, Suszynski, and Weingart (1989) asked tenth grade students to write essay responses to two short stories in either a personal, "reader-based" mode or in a formal, "text-based" mode. In the personal essays, students elaborated on their personal interpretations using their own experiences and text elements, while in the formal mode they interpreted only the text elements. Students writing in the personal mode produced essays judged to be significantly higher in quality in terms of level of interpretation than students writing in the formal mode. In writing in the personal mode, students were more likely to address the teacher in terms of a teacher/learner dialogue, adopting a tentative, exploratory stance. In contrast, in writing in a formal mode, students were more likely to perceive the teacher as

examiner, adopting a more definitive stance consistent with conveying the "right interpretation."

Thus, writing in a reader-based mode encouraged students to consider the meaning and significance of story elements, resulting in some elaboration of the students' point of view. And, because they could explore their thoughts in a less definitive manner, they were more willing to entertain optional perspectives and possibilities of meaning. While the results of an analysis of essay writing may not apply to journal writing, this study suggests that one characteristic related to learning defined as level of interpretation is an exploratory stance in which the students formulated their own ideas.

Readers may also discover meaning by relating their own autobiographical experiences to texts. In Rick's research, he examined college students' journal responses to determine the degree to which students' autobiographical responses were related to the students' level of interpretation of a series of short stories. As indicated in Table 1 in the handout, analysis of the types of responses across the different stories indicated that students were relatively consistent in employing "connecting" responses. As reported in Table 2, he found a relationship between the amount of "connecting" and the amount of "interpreting." These "connecting" responses were then analyzed to determine the degree of elaboration--based on the number of t-units employed. He found that the more students elaborated on their own evoked autobiographical experiences in their journals, the more likely that they would explore

the significance or point of that experience in terms of their own beliefs and attitudes.

This research suggests another characteristic that was related to learning in this context--degree of elaboration.

In these cases, the desired learning was the level of interpretation of specific essays. However, if the nature of learning was more narrowly defined--in terms of acquiring and applying key concepts in a course, would the same features be related to such learning?

It may be the case that for this kind of learning, there is no clear empirical relationship between certain features and learning. Other student factors may be influencing the degree of learning--the students' perceptions of journals as a form, their attitudes towards the journal, their preferred learning style, etc. that the journal writing itself may not itself be a significant contributing factor.

It may also be the case that certain journal characteristics are related to other characteristics. For example, as suggested by the Beach study, the more students elaborated on ideas, the more they were exploring their own knowledge.

Procedures

We (Rick Beach, Chris Anson, and Mark Christensen) are currently conducting a study to determine the relationships between features of journal entries as well as students' characteristics.

Subjects. The students in this study were enrolled in an introductory linguistics courses for English, English education, and elementary education students.

The students were asked to keep a journal during the course. They were given examples of entries demonstrating certain features of what the instructor believed to be affective. Students were also told that they would receive an overall journal rating based on the number of pages of entries.

During the course, we asked students to give us three representative entries. One sample entry is provided in the handout. So far, we have rated only the first entry, using the criteria listed in the handout labeled "Definitions of and Illustrative Features of Categories."

In order to determine students' perceptions of the nature of the journal, in the beginning of the course, we gave students a set of semantic differential scales and asked them to rate what they perceived to be a "good journal" as opposed to a "good essay." By having them rate both of these forms on the same scales, we assumed that they would be comparing the two.

Ratings of a journal entry. The agreements between three judges were determined using a Cronbach alpha reliability analysis. The results are listed in Table 3 of the handout. Agreements for three of the scales are in the .80 range, and five of the scales, in the .70 range. The fact that the judges achieve a .83 agreement on

"negative/positive" ratings was surprising given the subjective nature of that scale.

The correlations between these scales are presented in Table 3. These correlations indicate that the degree of informality was negatively related to the degree of elaboration or exploration of knowledge. One possible reason for this is that many of the more informal entries often dealt with a number of different ideas. This is indicated by the significant chi-square relationship between number of ideas and the degree of informality. However, these are simply relationships. They don't necessary imply that the more informal a journal, the less elaboration or exploration of knowledge, but they do suggest that a relationship exists.

As indicated at the bottom of Table 3, whether or not the students summarized material versus applied material was significantly related to the level of elaboration, exploration of knowledge, and positive ratings. By applying the linguistic concepts in the course to instances of their own language use, students often elaborated on their own experiences, formulating their own knowledge.

The judges positive/negative ratings were most highly related to degree of elaboration and knowledge exploration. This obviously reflects the judges' own biases in favor of more elaboration and knowledge exploration. It may also reflect their own engagement or interest in an entry. The judges may have simply been more interested in reading about students' own elaborated application of ideas

involving application of knowledge than in reading one more rehash of the course content.

This reflects a basic problem of reading journals--what could be defined as the "boredom effect." Reading journals that rehash the same, familiar course content can be stultifyingly boring. When students generates their own ideas, a journal may be more interesting, and potentially more likely to invite a dialogic response.

However, students use journals for different purposes consistent with their own needs. Some students may need to use the journal to rehash course content in order to "get things straight" in their minds. This suggests that instructors need to recognize or intuit the students' purposes for using a journal.

Students' perceptions of a "good journal" vs. "good paper." As we noted, students were asked to rate their perceptions of what constituted a "good journal" and a "good paper" on 12 different scales. The results of these ratings are presented in Figure 1 on your handout with the mean ratings for perceptions of "good journals" indicated by "j's" in boxes and the mean ratings for "good papers" indicated by "p's." For each of these scales, the mean ratings for a "good journal" differed significantly from mean ratings for "good paper." Students in the course conceived of journal writing as significantly more informal, private, easy, emotional, random, involved, unstructured, tentative, elaborated, spontaneous,

conversational, and unorganized than their conceptions of a "good paper."

The influence of perceptions. The question then arises as to whether these perceptions influenced students' journal writing and/or performance in the course. Of the twelve perception scales in Figure 1 in the handout, those scales having to do with form rather than any emotional relationship with a journal had the strongest effects on ratings for those entries. This suggests that students' perceptions of form of the journal had more influence on their writing than students' feelings about the journal.

A regression analysis was then conducted to determine the influence of all perception, attitude, and entry rating factors on the final grade and overall journal rating. The one factor that emerged as a significant predictor of final grade or overall journal rating was the scale of perception of the journal as "planned" vs. "spontaneous." As presented in Table 4 in the handout, the students who perceived the journal to be more spontaneous were more likely to be "affective," "unfolding," and had a higher overall journal rating and final grade. And, according to the Schmeck Inventory of Learning Processes, these students were more likely to be "deep" rather than "shallow" thinkers and "elaborators" rather than "non-elaborators."

How, then, might this perception of the journal as "spontaneous" rather than planned be related to learning? We can only speculate, but in reading the entries, we found that by using the journal in a

spontaneous manner, students were more likely think in an exploratory, metacognitive manner. They were more open to making explicit their own thinking about their thinking, something we crudely describe as the "ah hah" phenomemon. For example, they would note that they didn't understand a concept or idea. They would then write about what they didn't understand. Then lights would come on in their heads, and they would exclaim that they now understood the concept or idea.

Another student: "according to the definition, allomorphs are phonetically and semantically identically morphs. I think I just got it: [ph]is an allophone only because, on its own, it cannot be a morpheme."

Or, in talking about the structure of "natural narratives," one student noted that, "It seems that the structures would be limited to cultures which are exposed to the written narrative--or--on further reflection--it seems a case of which came first--the chicken or the egg?"

Or, another student: "complex words can be broken down like trees--tree-s--tree is still a word even without the "s"--no, this is wrong. Simple words cannot be broken down."

Or, another student: "a friend of mine called from New Jersey--how would she say that phonetically [Nu Jesi]--whereas I would say something like [Nu Jursi]. I seem to have a problem being consistent in my transcription. I'm not sure what system I should use for diphthongs which do not appear in the vowel chart."

Having explicitly acknowledged some dissonance, these students are using the journal to work out their problems.

Relationships with learning. To what degree is any of this related to how much students learned in the course, as determined by a final grade--a grade based primarily on objective tests on course content. The overall journal rating, which was based primarily on the number of pages of journal entries, was moderately related to the final grade--.30. The ratings for the one entry were not related. We still need to examine the other two entries in order to obtain a more reliable measure. However, it may be the case that because the grade was based on objective tests, the kinds of learning that is measured by objective tests are not related to the kinds of learning occurring with journal writing.

What are some implications for teaching?

The fact that students' perceptions of form influenced their writing suggests the need to provide students with examples of sample entries that illustrate certain thinking processes.

However, we strongly believe that the form of journal writing transcends simply matters of textual form. Conceiving of form of journal writing simply in terms of text form may repeat the dismal history of instruction based on prescriptive text models.

As we have argued, the students' perceptions of or stance towards the text is an important factor--their relationship to the writing.

In trying to define the nature of journals as a genre, we would argue that journals are a hybrid form that simultaneously incorporate four different stances illustrated in Figure 2 on the handout, stances examined in more detail in Beach and Hynds.

Let us briefly define each of those stances. In adopting a social stance, students are considering their social relationship with persona in texts, audiences, or even their own alter-ego persona who emerge in their writing.

In adopting a textual stance, students are conceiving of the text in terms of text conventions, such as narration or exposition.

In adopting an institutional stance, they are considering the fact that within the academy, as Patricia Bizzell notes, there are "no absolutes." They realize that, even in the journal, they may be expected to extend their thinking and critically examine underlying assumptions.

In adopting a field stance, they are learning to think according to the conventions of a certain field or domain of knowledge. In this course, they were learning to think as a linguist thinks.

These stances both overlap and conflict. Students may write entries as mini-essays according to a textual stance because, as students assuming an institutional role, they assume that all writing in the academy consists of essays. Or, someone may be an expert on jazz music--field stance, but may have difficulty writing a newspaper

review of a jazz concert because they are unfamiliar with conventions of review-writing--the textual stance.

In using these multiple stances, students may begin to recognize that their own writing represents different persona constituted by different stances.

For example, one student, writing about his journal writing in a writing methods course, noted: "Most of the time, I internally construct one or two ideas that I find useful or practical for my style. So I suppose my strategies are basically connecting and interpreting facts or theories to what I believe is best for me as a teacher. I've looked at most of my writing entries, and it's almost as if my audience is me--my purpose is to clarify or expand some point for me or my students....I notice as I reread my entries that I'm much more formal than I thought. From time to time, I enjoy citing autobiographical experiences, expecially when I discover a new insight. There is a purpose for doing this. As a future teacher, I hope to allow my personality to be defined to my students by telling them stories of "how I used to be" or "when that happened to me," etc. This tells me there is a sense of both spontaneity and predetermined thinking in my writing...It's interesting that what I write for my peers, I use a different voice--less authoritative [based on an] assumption about what they might think of me."

In reflecting on his reflecting the student evokes an social stance--thinking about his relationship with peers and his own

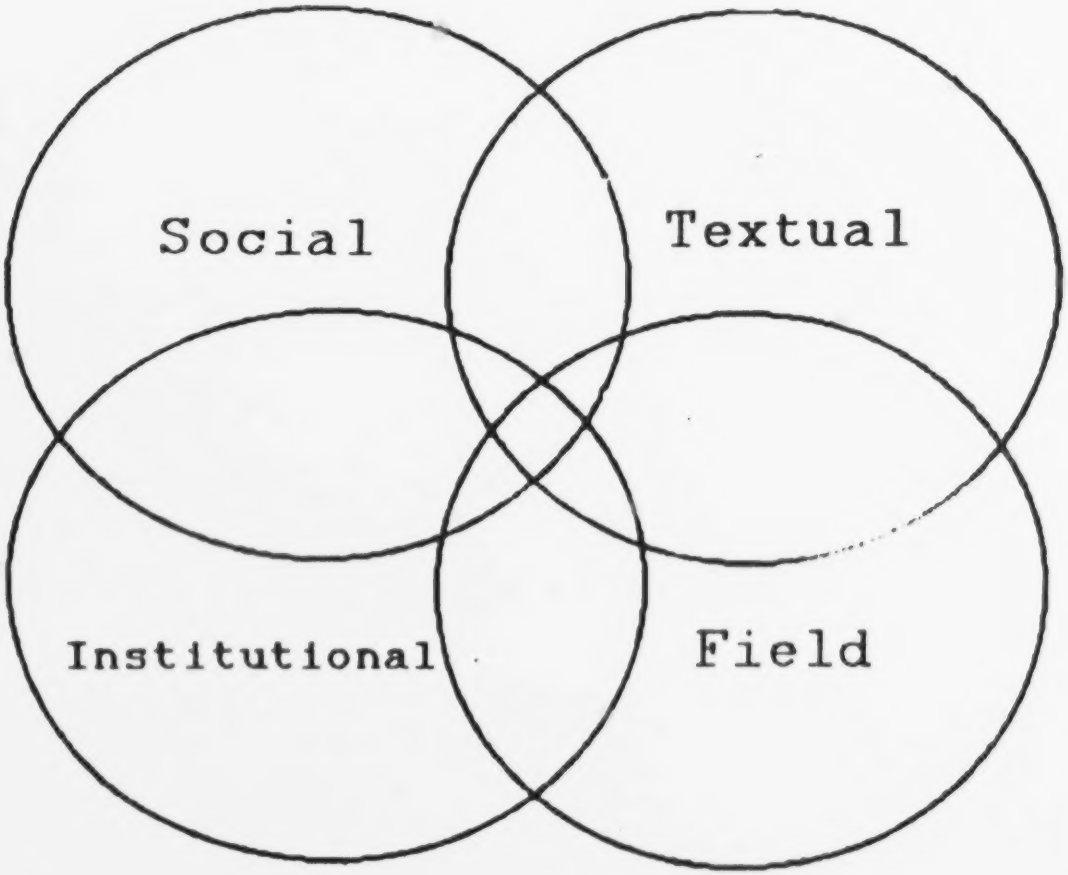
emerging sense of himself as audience, a textual stance--thinking about his ability to "expand some point for me or my students," an institutional stance--thinking in the role of a teacher, and a field stance--his knowledge of appropriate teaching techniques.

The stories that he spins out in his journal--the autobiographical experiences, serve to define himself, as he notes, "to his students" so that the journal writing itself functions to clarify his social role. The stories emerge, I presume, as spontaneous. However, the design behind using the stories for pedagogical purposes--now the institutional stance, introduce a sense of what he calls predeterrmined thinking--he's deliberately using the journal to fulfill potential institutional roles.

What's important in all of this is to consider the degree to which students are willing to play out all four stances, using each to reflect on the other. The spontaneity evokes a surprising candidness of thinking balanced against certain predetermined needs and conventions. In other words, in writing journals, students are learning both to experiment and carry out their predetermined agendas.

Figure 2

Stances Constituting Discourse Development



Related Research on Journal Writing

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Newell, George, Karen Suszynski, and Ruth Weingart. "The Effects of Writing in a Reader-based and Text-based Mode on Students' Understanding of Two Short Stories." Journal of Reading Behavior (in press).

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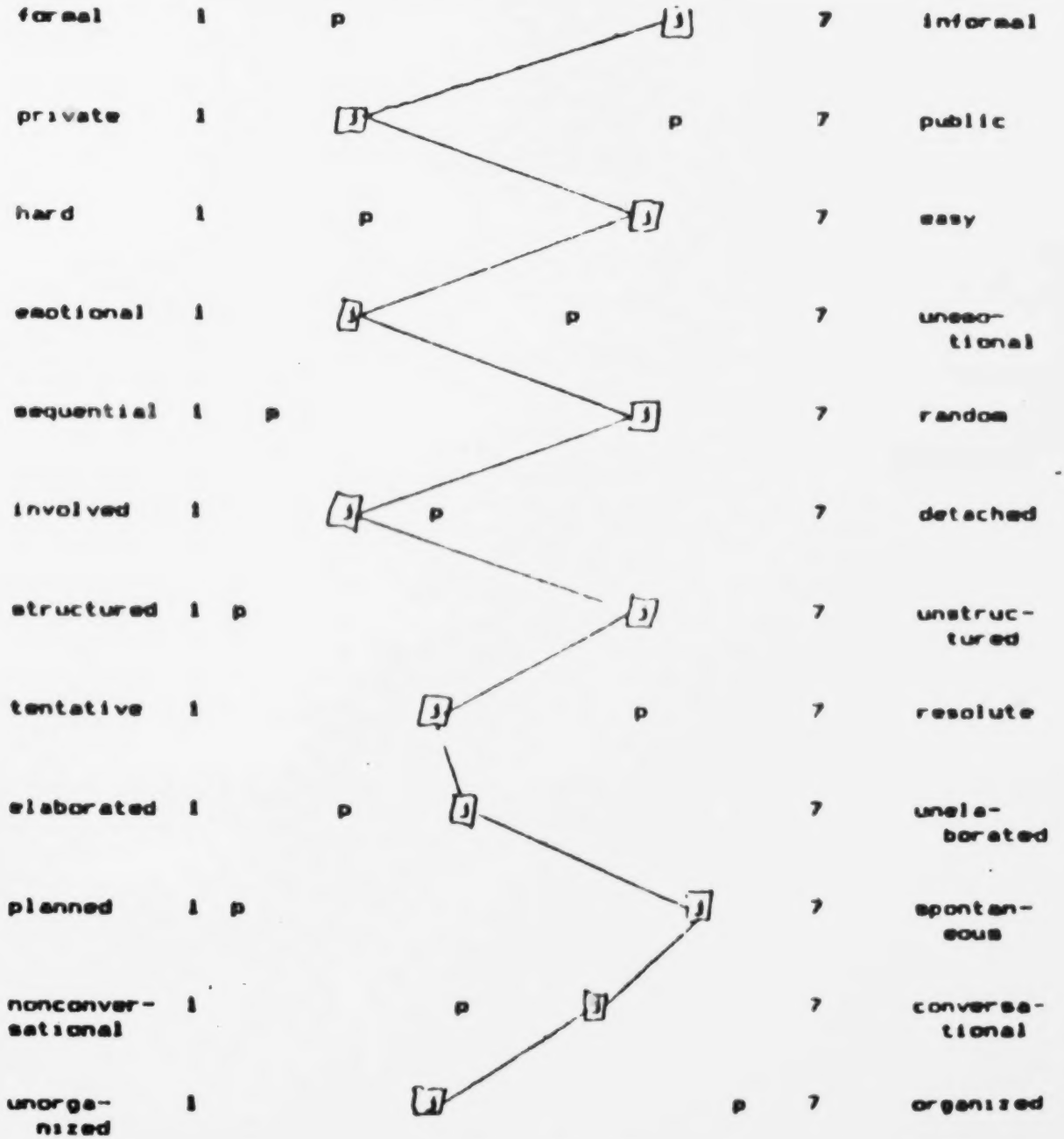
Sternglass, Marilyn, and Sharon Pugh. "Retrospective Accounts of Language and Learning Processes." Written Communication 3 (1987): 297-323.

Wess, Robert. "Journal Writing and Student Learning." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, GA, March 19, 1987.

Figure 1

Students' Mean Ratings for Perceptions of a "Good Journal" and a "Good Paper" (n = 64)
("j" = a "good journal," "p" = a "good paper")


formal 1 p j 7 informal
private 1 j p 7 public
hard 1 p j 7 easy
emotional 1 j p 7 unemo-tional
sequential 1 p j 7 random
involved 1 j p 7 detached
structured 1 p j 7 unstruc-tured
tentative 1 j p 7 resolute
elaborated 1 p j 7 unela-borated
planned 1 p j 7 spontan-eous
nonconver-sational 1 p j 7 conversa-tional
unorga-nized 1 j p 7 organized

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CCCC Session:
Research on Journal Writing
Seattle, 1989

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Table 1

The Mean Percentages of Journals Response Strategies For Each of Five Texts (n = 49)

Response Strategies	Mean %				
	"Mushrooms"	"A &P"	"My Side of the Matter"	"This is My Living Room"	"Private Greaves"
Interpreting	42%	36%	42%	36%	39%
Connecting	19%	24%	20%	26%	25%
Engaging	16%	14%	12%	14%	20%
Describing	18%	16%	21%	20%	15%
Judging	5%	10%	4%	12%	1%

Table 2

The Relationships between Response Strategies

Interpreting	Connecting	Engaging	Describing	Judging
Interpreting	.33 **			
Connecting		.49 *		
Engaging			.29 ***	
Describing				
Judging				

* <.001
** <.01
*** <.05

Journal Entry: Autobiographical response

One student's responses to "Fourth of July," in which a high-school age boy, Chuck, must determine whether or not to seek revenge against Jack for stealing his money.

The student initially inferred that the story was about revenge, but that revenge "is a complicated idea--it can take many forms." He prefers to examine the idea through narrative:

"The notion of 'getting back at someone' may not be that easy to talk about. Most of us should be able to break the ice with a personal anecdote:

It's a hot sommer day in 1976. I am pitching a Babe Ruth baseball game against Plainville, arch rival of <u>any</u> athletic team from Cary. The score is close, and from the start, there is an intimidating game of "burn-back" the hitters escalating between myself and the opposing pitcher. He is seventeen; I am sixteen. We were both throwing as hard as we probably ever will. By the fourth inning, contact is finally made, and my second baseman takes a fastball on the hip. I have known him since I was five year old, my team was two runs ahead, and there is no doubt in anyone's mind what my obligations were...revenge...an eye for an eye, a hip for a hip.

When I take the mound, I am uneasy...I really do <u>not</u> want to hurt a batter. But I have little choice. Everyone, from my fielders to my coach to the moms and dads in the aluminum lawn chairs, are waiting for poetic justice, for our collective revenge.

I plant my first pitch on the ribs of their pitcher and he walks stiffly down to first base. It all seems fair, until I try to pick him off first base, and then I accidently hit him <u>again</u>. This time, to the disgust of my infield, I have to say, "I'm sorry, I did not mean it that time." Two years later, that pitcher and I were the best of friends.

As for revenge, it can be most satisfying if you singly <u>know</u> you can enact it. My experience was different because I sought revenge, yet I did not feel good about it at all. My firecracker was the baseball; I lit it. A "burn-back" should have been as effective.

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Table 3

Reliability Results, Correlations, and Chi-Squares

for Journal Entry Rating Criteria

formal/ informal (alpha=.83)					
objective/ affective (alpha=.77)					
unelaborated/ elaborated (alpha=.83)	-.29				
predetermined/ unfolding (alpha=.77)	.58	.47			
external/ internal knowledge (alpha=.75)	-.22	.30	.66	.30	
negative/ positive (alpha=.83)	-.28	.31	.76		.83
	formal/ informal	objective/ affective	unelaborated/ elaborated	predeter- mined/ unfolding	external/ internal knowledge
Significant Chi-Square Relationships:					
develops one/ refers to many ideas (alpha=.79)	.01		.02	.02	
summarizes material/ applies material (alpha=.74)		.03 .	.003		.001

Definitions of and Illustrative Features of Categories

Descriptive categories

1. Develops one idea/refers to many ideas: extent of sustained focus on a single idea or topic for the entire entry.
Features: presence of absence of topic-openers, shifts in noun references, lists of points, frequent paragraph breaks, violations of relevance maxim.

2. Applies/does not apply material: extent to which the student repeats or rehearses the course material vs. applies the material to their own experiences, problems, issues beyond the course.
Features: rehearsal marked by lists, definitions, textbook material, repetition of lecture notes.

3. Entry is not/is course-specific: extent to which most of the entry refers to material outside of the course vs. directly related to the course.
Features: cites own experiences with no link to the course content

4. Adopts/does not adopt a metacognitive stance: extent to which student reflects on and evaluates the value of their own immediate thoughts or thought processes.
Features: often stops rehearsing and makes an "ah ah" comment, signaling an awareness of the nature or value of their thoughts.

Rating Scales

1. Formal/informal. Informal may include lack of sentence of paragraph boundaries; fragments; slang or casual lexis ("so anyway," "yeah, right," "oh! another thing," etc.); dashes; little use of formal expository structuring.

2. Objective/affective. Expression of emotional reactions or feelings vs. an impersonal stance ("I was really upset about the textbook:" "this is a neat way of looking at the problem," etc.)

3. Unelaborated/elaborated. Depth of exploration of ideas: sustanced focus vs. frequent shifts; use of details.

4. Predetermined/unfolding. Degree to which begins with a thesis or idea and deductively uses the idea to extend the entry vs. spontaneously explores thoughts in an unpredetermined manner. ("Oh! now I see," "wait a minute," "I wonder if...," "maybe it's because...")

5. Externally static/internally constructed knowledge. Degree of regurgitation or restatement of formulated textbook/lecture material vs. reformulates material in own terms or own schema.

6. negative/positive reactions. Raters' subjective evaluation of their own enjoyment/perceptions of "interestingness."

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of a "Good Journal" and Means for Entry Ratings, Grade, and Learning Style (n = 81)

	Students' Perceptions of a "Good Journal"	
	"Planned"	"Spontaneous"
Entry Ratings		
- "objective/affective"	5.9	6.9 *
- "predetermined/unfolding"	6.9	8.1 **
Combined Entry Ratings	41.7	45.8 *
Course Grade	78.4	83.6 *
Preferred Learning Style (Schmeck Inventory of of Learning Processes)		
- "non-elaborator"/ "elaborator"	14.1	19.5 **
- "shallow"/ "deep"	13.7	18.8 **

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$